



# Older Women Matter

Harnessing the talents of  
Australia's older female workforce

PROJECT PARTNER



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*Report embargoed until 4.00am AEST Thursday 23rd May 2013*

An electronic version of this document can be found on the DCA website at  
<http://www.dca.org.au/dca-research.html>



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**Australian  
Human Rights  
Commission**



Here in Australia, we enjoy one of the highest life expectancies in the world. This means longer working lives and more time to contribute to Australia's economy and society. It also means that most people, particularly women, need to work for many more of these extended years to ensure their financial security.

Despite this, we are ignoring the huge pool of talent and experience represented by older women. This is a terrible waste of human capital, undermines the national imperative of growing the economy and results in significant loss to businesses. It also impacts the financial, emotional and physical wellbeing of the many women who are consigned to unwanted early retirement.

At the Australian Human Rights Commission, we are tackling the fundamental societal attitudes that underlie age discrimination. My top priority is to advocate for older Australians to have the opportunity to work up to, and well beyond, their 60s. The benefits are clear.

We must address the challenge that there are many skilled older women who are willing to work, yet they are underemployed and undervalued. My hope, in partnering with this research, is to provide businesses large and small with actionable initiatives so they will recruit, retain and develop this significant and experienced pool of talent.



**THE HON SUSAN RYAN AO**  
AGE DISCRIMINATION COMMISSIONER  
AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**This project was conceived and developed by DCA's Chief Executive Officer, Nareen Young, DCA's Research Director, Dr Jane O'Leary and Dr Graeme Russell.**

DCA would like to particularly thank our partner, the Australian Human Rights Commission, and Sageco for supporting this important project.

DCA research on the progression of women in their careers is proudly supported by the National Australia Bank (NAB).

The project has benefited significantly from the intellectual and practitioner insights of our partners, sponsors and broader project reference group including:

- Dr Tim Adair, Director, National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, Dr Jeromey Temple (former) Director and Peter Matwijiw (former) General Manager Policy and Research
- Lisa Annese, Programs and Development Director, DCA
- Rowan Arndt, Head of Diversity and Inclusion, NAB
- Professor Marian Baird, Director of the Women and Work Research Group, University of Sydney Business School
- Catriona Byrne, Creative Director, Sageco
- Dimity Hodge, Research Fellow, Australian Human Rights Commission
- Kate McCormack, Director People, Culture and Learning, Mercy Health
- Alison Monroe, Managing Director, Sageco
- The Hon Susan Ryan AO, Age Discrimination Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Older Women Matter** is a partnership research initiative between Diversity Council Australia (DCA) and the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC).

The project was developed to encourage Australian organisations to implement workforce solutions that better harness the skills and talents of Australia's older female workforce.

## **A Critical Underutilised Talent Pool**

Older female workers (defined as 45 years plus) represent a critical segment of Australia's workforce now and into the future. Their employment participation has grown strongly over the past few decades, and they now constitute a sizeable proportion (17%) of Australia's workforce. There also remains significant opportunity to further leverage their workforce contributions. Relative to their male counterparts, older female workers have lower labour market participation rates, higher underutilisation rates and Australia's performance in this regard lags substantially behind comparable countries.

## **The Case For Better Leveraging Workforce Contributions**

Better utilising the older female workforce has significant benefits for business, as well as the broader Australian economy and older female workers themselves.

*For Business.* Organisations stand to gain substantially from the greater employment participation of older women. The combined impacts of the benefits gained by both a gender and age inclusive workforce offer significant return on investment to businesses:

- Research examining older workers indicates that organisations can experience benefits associated with sustained job performance, high motivation levels, high reliability, improved staff retention and accumulation of experience, knowledge and skills over working lives; and
- Gender diversity research indicates businesses can experience a range of benefits from a workforce which is inclusive of women, including reducing attrition, enhancing innovation, group performance, access to target markets and financial performance, and minimising legal and reputational risks.

*For Australia.* At a national level, Productivity Commission modelling indicates that increasing older women's labour participation rates to match men's could increase per capita GDP growth to 2044-45 by 1.5%.

*For Older Women.* For older women, paid work provides access to greater financial security as a consequence of having an independent source of income, as well as enhanced social support, satisfaction, self-esteem and mental and physical health. With life expectancy increasing to more than 84 years for women, and close to 70% of older female workers rating their health as good or excellent, many older female workers are at their peak. For many, this is translating into changing expectations about the trajectory of their working lives.

Smart employers are no longer making assumptions about their older workers' retirement plans and are instead ensuring they develop talent across their workforce, inclusive of all age and gender demographics.

## Our Approach

For this project, we reviewed recent academic and industry research, including DCA's survey data, to identify the current situation for older women in employment and develop practical evidence-based guidance to assist organisations better harness the talents of Australia's older female workforce. We then tested these preliminary findings with a Think Tank of leading diversity practitioners.

## A Framework For Organisational Action: Making Older Female Workers Matter

Our review of research enabled us to generate a framework for action to assist organisations to attract, engage and retain older female workers, as well as to structure effective transitions into retirement (see *Figure 1*). This framework is organised around seven key organisational enablers of older women's employment identified in our research review. The framework puts forward a broad range of actions for each key enabler. In essence, these actions involve organisations looking at their existing talent management practices through a gendered age lens, to see how well these promote a workplace environment which is inclusive of older female workers.

In response to feedback from our Think Tank of leading diversity practitioners, we accompanied this framework for action with suggestions for how organisations can 'lay the groundwork' – that is, most effectively start an internal conversation and a high level of engagement around the employment of older women. We discuss four key strategies, these being:

- Make a compelling business case;
- Understand the state-of-play with respect to older women's employment;
- Emphasise the sustainable workforce of the future; and
- Focus on inclusion.

Initiating and framing internal conversations in this way will maximise engagement around older female employment, by demonstrating that a range of business benefits can be generated from creating a workplace environment which is inclusive of this critical part of your workforce of the future.

DCA and project partner AHRC hope this project and its findings will constitute a 'call to action' for all Australian organisations to commit to embarking on a journey to better leverage the contributions of older women workers.

Figure 1: A Framework for Organisational Action

